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Advancement of women

Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared in response to General Assembly resolution 58/146. It focuses on the empowerment of rural women, including in relation to access to education and training, control over resources, participation in decision-making, changes in household structures and the impact of HIV/AIDS, migration and information and communication technologies. The report outlines activities carried out by the organizations of the United Nations system to improve the situation of rural women and makes recommendations for consideration by the Assembly.

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Contents

		Paragraphs	Page
I.	Introduction	1–8	3
II.	Empowerment of rural women within the context of globalization	9–50	4
	A. Land and property rights	15–21	6
	B. Credit	22–24	7
	C. Public goods and biodiversity	25–26	7
	D. Employment and income-generating activities	27–30	8
	E. Education and training	31–34	9
	F. Decision-making	35–37	10
	G. Household structures and gender relations	38–40	10
	H. Migration	41–44	11
	I. HIV/AIDS	45–47	12
	J. Information and communication technologies	48–50	12
III.	Activities of the United Nations system	51–61	13
IV.	Conclusions and recommendations	62–65	16

I. Introduction

1. By its resolution 58/146 of 22 December 2003 on the improvement of the situation of women in rural areas, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on different aspects of the empowerment of rural women, including the impact of macroeconomic policy frameworks on their situation.

2. The Beijing Declaration[1] and Platform for Action[2] adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women, focused on improving the situation of rural women through equal access to productive resources, especially land, capital and technology, as well as to gainful employment, decision-making, education and health services. The Platform for Action emphasized the need for successful strategies to empower women living in rural areas. Subsequently, in 2000 at its twenty-third special session, the General Assembly stressed the importance of the right of women to own and inherit land and pointed to microcredit and other financial instruments as successful strategies for the economic empowerment of rural women. In the context of the 10-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action being carried out in 2005, the Governments of 134 Member States and one observer State provided information on the situation of women in rural areas (see E/CN.6/2005/2 and Corr.1).

3. The United Nations Millennium Declaration (General Assembly resolution 55/2), committed Governments to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable. The Millennium Development Goals include a goal that calls for empowering women and promoting gender equality. Proposed implementation strategies have acknowledged that two thirds of the world's poor live in rural areas and that the need for progress on education, gender equality, maternal and child mortality, HIV/AIDS eradication and sustainable development appears particularly acute in rural regions of most developing countries.[3]

4. The declaration adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women[4] at its forty-ninth session emphasized that the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was essential to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration.

5. The Monterrey Consensus, adopted at the International Conference on Financing for Development,[5] noted that investments in basic economic and social infrastructure, social services and social protection, including education, health, nutrition, shelter and social security programmes, which were gender sensitive and fully inclusive of the rural sector, were vital for enabling people to adapt to and benefit from changing economic conditions and opportunities. The Monterrey Consensus, with a view to strengthening the effectiveness of the global economic system's support for development, encouraged bringing gender perspectives into the mainstream of development policies at all levels and in all sectors. It further called for microfinance and credit for micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, including in rural areas, particularly for women, as well as for social and gender budget policies.

6. The Commission on the Status of Women addressed the situation of rural women as a cross-cutting area of concern at its fortieth, forty-first and forty-sixth sessions. The Commission considered critical areas of concern in respect of women

and poverty and women and the environment. Resolution 40/9 of the Commission on the Status of Women and Economic and Social Council resolution 2002/5 of 24 July 2002 urged Governments and all appropriate actors to give women the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property and to undertake socio-economic policies that promoted sustainable development and supported and ensured poverty eradication programmes to benefit women of all ages, in particular marginalized women, including rural women. Agreed conclusions 1997/1 adopted by the Commission at its forty-first session stressed that the knowledge and expertise of women, especially of rural women and indigenous women, in the use and the protection of natural resources should be recognized, consolidated, protected and fully used in policies and programmes for the management of the environment. The Commission also provided an input to the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council in 2003 on an integrated and multisectoral approach to rural development.

7. The General Assembly has consistently given attention to the situation of rural women. In his report to the Assembly in 2001 (A/56/268) the Secretary-General noted the importance of creating an enabling policy environment for improving the situation of rural women, which would include the design and implementation of a gender-sensitive macroeconomic policy framework and social support systems to accommodate women's productive and reproductive roles and encourage a more equal gender division of labour in the household. In 2003, the Secretary-General concluded that the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women had complemented the efforts of intergovernmental bodies to improve the situation of rural women. The Secretary-General recommended that the concluding comments of the Committee should be used when formulating policies and designing programmes focused on the situation of rural women (see A/58/167).

8. The present report focuses on empowerment of rural women, including in relation to access to education and training, resources, in particular land and income, and decision-making processes; changes in household structure; and the impact of HIV/AIDS, migration and information and communication technologies. The report outlines activities undertaken by United Nations entities to improve the situation of rural women. It provides recommendations for consideration by the General Assembly.

II. Empowerment of rural women within the context of globalization

9. Major aspects of globalization that relate to rural development include the commercialization of agriculture and expansion of agro-industries, the liberalization of international trade and markets for food and other agricultural products, the intensification of international and internal labour migration, the increasing privatization of resources and services and the wider use of information and communication technologies. The implications of globalization for rural women are complex and data remain sparse and unindicative.[6] For some women in rural areas, the ongoing changes present new opportunities; for others, they intensify social exclusion and marginalization.

10. Rural women play a critical role in agricultural production and in the rural economies of developing countries. In the developing world as a whole, agriculture

accounted for about 63 per cent of total female employment in 1997 and it is still the most important sector for female employment in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.[7] Rural women make major and multiple contributions to the achievement of food security and produce more than half of the food grown worldwide.[8] In sub-Saharan Africa this figure is higher, with women contributing 60 to 80 per cent of the labour in food production both for household consumption and for sale. In Asia, women do 50 to 90 per cent of the work in the rice fields.[9] Women diversify and perform multiple tasks simultaneously to sustain their livelihoods, working on farms and engaging in off-farm activities, as well as continuing their critical role in terms of reproduction. Their responsibilities include the collection of water and fuel, activities that are particularly burdensome in areas with a poor social infrastructure.

11. Within the context of globalization, macroeconomic policies, including those related to economic stability, external debt, taxation, investment, employment and markets, have a direct influence on the livelihoods of rural women, in both the formal and informal sectors. Development of macroeconomic policies must take into account the impact of those policies on rural women to ensure their equal access to resources, services and economic opportunities and to enhance their productivity.

12. Women must not only have equal rights, capabilities and access to resources and opportunities, but they must also have the agency to use those rights, capabilities, resources and opportunities to make strategic choices.[9] Empowerment of women in rural areas is dependent on several factors, including ownership and control over land; access to diverse types of employment and income-generating activities; access to public goods (such as water, village commons and forests), infrastructure, education and training, health care and financial services and markets; and opportunities for participation in political life and in the design and implementation of policies and programmes.

13. The Beijing Platform for Action emphasized that the empowerment of women is a critical factor in the eradication of poverty and that strategies should address the multidimensional nature of poverty. The Millennium Declaration reaffirmed that approach. Government contributions to the 10-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Platform for Action confirmed that the impact of poverty on women is greater and more serious than on men and that poverty affects more women than men (see E/CN.6/2005/2 and Corr.1). In recognition of the fact that the majority of the extreme poor live in rural areas in many regions, especially in Africa and Asia, the Millennium Project proposed as one of seven clusters of national strategies for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals the promotion of vibrant rural communities by increasing food productivity, raising rural incomes and expanding rural access to essential public services and infrastructure.[3]

14. Women's poverty is reflected in undernourishment and malnourishment, resulting, inter alia, from inadequate income, lack of education and gender inequality within households.[10] Women in rural areas have high fertility rates and limited access to information and services on reproductive health. There is also a significant work burden and time allocation differential between women and men in developing countries. A World Bank study found that women in rural Africa spend 65 per cent of their time on journeys on foot. Improvements in rural infrastructure, such as affordable and safe water, sanitation and energy near the home and

accessible and affordable modes of transport could dramatically improve the time poverty of rural women.[3]

A. Land and property rights

15. Despite efforts to diversify, most households in rural areas still depend on land and natural resources for their basic subsistence. Without secure land rights, farmers have little or no access to credit, rural organizations, irrigation systems and other agricultural infrastructure and services. Land and property ownership increases women's food security, their bargaining power within the household and their social status as members of the community. A study of 20 savings and credit groups established under an International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) project in Bangladesh[11] showed that many women used their loans and income to gain access to agricultural land. Lack of land ownership has often contributed to increasing the unpaid and unrecorded work of women outside the home, which can mean that women lose control over their own labour.

16. In many countries, customary laws and practices allow women to access land and enable them to engage in and benefit from agricultural, livestock and forest-based production. However, when land becomes a marketable asset, women's access rights to land may be violated or ignored by family and community members, particularly in the case of widowed and divorced women.[12]

17. One of the major trends in globalization is the privatization of property through titling and registration programmes and accompanying legislation. Land reform programmes have varied historical backgrounds. One common denominator of the privatization process in a number of regions is that privatization tends to concentrate most land rights in the hands of a minority. Because of economic and cultural factors and power relationships, this minority often excludes women.[13]

18. Some general trends in the process of privatization of land at the regional level can be identified. In Latin America, current land distribution programmes are based on land banks or land market schemes that operate on the principle of purchasing of land, necessitating the availability of sufficient cash resources. Women have benefited less than men from these programmes. For example, a survey of land distribution conducted in Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Peru found that women represented only one third or less of landowners.[14]

19. In Eastern Europe, agricultural reform has mainly involved the reform of tenure rights. Previously collectively or state-owned land has been privatized as private and corporate farms and either been returned to pre-socialist-era owners or to ex-collective or state-farm workers. Although land reform took diverse forms in the 1990s, private property became the predominant form of land ownership and new owners have mostly been men.[15] For example, in Kyrgyzstan, a land distribution survey in 2002 showed that only 450 of 38,724 farms belonged to women.[15]

20. In most of Asia, land reform has focused on converting tenants into private smallholder owners, except in China, where a different model promoting the household responsibility system has been adopted. Ownership rights to agricultural land remain in the public domain, but the right to exploit farmland has been privatized. Traditional attitudes and stereotypes regarding the role of women and

men in society have given men control over land. In Nepal, for example, according to the 2001 census, only 11 per cent of the total households reported women owning land (see E/CN.6/2005/2 and Corr.1).

21. In sub-Saharan Africa, reform has often sought to transform customary tenure land into state property or individualized private property. Men have tended to acquire legal ownership of the land. In Mauritania, only 18.7 per cent of women have land titles in their own names (see E/CN.6/2005/2 and Corr.1). Individualized and private ownership may also transfer to men rights, such as cultivation rights, that women and minority groups may have under customary rules.

B. Credit

22. Credit enables producers to initiate, sustain, or expand agricultural production and increase productivity. However, producers with limited resources, especially rural women, receive only a minor share of formal agricultural credit even in countries where they are major producers. As land is the major asset used as collateral to obtain rural credit, women have limited access to credit facilities.[16] Withdrawal of credit provided by the Government in rural areas as the result of an increased liberalization and privatization of the financial sector can make access to credit even more difficult for women. Lack of information and knowledge concerning how to apply for credit and mutual distrust between banking institutions and agricultural producers constitute additional obstacles.[16]

23. Over the last decade, considerable attention has been given to microcredit interventions for the empowerment of women. However, mixed results have been seen in South Asia, one of the most active regions in promoting microcredit for women. Some studies showed that the bargaining position of women within the household was strengthened by access to credit and control over income and assets. Assessment of credit programmes in Bangladesh, however, showed that men either significantly or partially controlled the credit women brought into the household and that loans were used for purposes different from the ones applied for.[17] Some studies have argued that loans and the pressure to repay have led to stress and to higher levels of domestic violence.[18]

24. To be effective, a focus on microcredit has to be part of a more comprehensive policy framework that addresses women's poverty through, inter alia, property rights, access to natural resources and abolition of discriminatory laws and stereotypes. It is crucial to combine microfinance interventions with equal access to markets, a favourable regulatory climate, training and extension services, new technologies and viable and financially sustainable rural financial systems, including eventual access to more formal large-scale, macrocredits. Efforts to empower women through financial services should also address prevailing power relationships.

C. Public goods and biodiversity

25. The trend towards privatization not only affects rural populations in terms of access to land but also in relation to access to public goods, such as water and forests. It can result in the loss of control over biogenetic resources. The increased scarcity of common resources, as well as the erosion of biogenetic diversity and

degradation of land, water and other public goods,[19] affect the productivity and economic viability of women's work, both in farm and non-farm activities. It also reduces women's access to close and free sources of raw materials and creates hardships in terms of the time and energy spent collecting wood for fuel, water and other common property resources. As a result, women's aquaculture, horticulture and animal husbandry activities, which are often their only source of income augmentation, are jeopardized.

26. The modernization of agriculture can also increase the risk that rights to biogenetic resources will be concentrated in large commercial enterprises. Rural women are closely associated with local ecological resources and manage biodiversity on a daily basis. A renewed interest in biodiversity and indigenous plants and materials has created opportunities for rural women to utilize their traditional knowledge and experience and to take advantage of emerging markets. However, this potential may not be fully realized unless their rights are protected.

D. Employment and income-generating activities

27. The spread of agro-industry and rural industrialization has increased the possibilities for women to access cash income through self-employment or the setting up of rural enterprises. Wage employment allows women to get out of the relative isolation of the home or their small rural communities and gain self-esteem and confidence.

28. A study of garment and textile manufacturing in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone in Bangladesh, which provides urban employment opportunities for rural women, found that more than 90 per cent of female garment workers had high self-esteem, compared with 53 per cent for female workers in non-export industries. Of the former, 52 per cent also reported that their husbands helped them with domestic work for an average of 1.9 hours per day.[20] In addition, the female garment workers tended to delay marriage and childbirth. A survey of households conducted in two townships in China confirmed that the division of labour and gender-specific decision-making patterns in households changed as the source and structure of household income changed. The role of women in decision-making increased as their incomes increased. When the contribution of women to the purchase of agricultural inputs increased, their share in decision-making increased from 25 to 29 per cent and when the labour input of women to marketing increased from 47 to 56 per cent, their share in related decision-making increased from 53 to 61 per cent.[21]

29. However, achievement of these positive impacts is affected by a number of factors and it is difficult to identify lasting changes.[22] For example, women who are seasonally employed by the fruit export industry in Chile increase their visibility in terms of their contribution to the household income and benefit from independent access to income. However, the potential for a more enduring change in terms of the division of labour in the household is circumscribed by the fact that women are only seasonally employed and revert to their traditional roles as wives and mothers in the off season. Moreover, even when they are earning wages, women retain the primary responsibility for domestic work.[23]

30. There is little evidence that the increased involvement of women in paid work has significantly reduced their share of unpaid work in caring for households. This is due, inter alia, to inadequate infrastructure, such as water, sanitation and

transport, as well as the fact that men and boys do not take on a greater share of responsibility for household management and family care.[6] It has also been argued that, together with liberalization and privatization, decreased social provisioning by the State has shifted the costs of social reproduction from the paid to the unpaid economy,[24] which can reduce women's opportunities for employment and other income-generating activities. The additional work and time burdens borne by women are not counted in the national income and product accounts.[3]

E. Education and training

31. A successful agenda for the empowerment of rural women requires the dismantling of values, structures and processes that maintain women's subordination and that are used to justify inequality in access to political, social and economic resources. Education plays an important role in this process. Studies in many countries have shown that education for girls is the single most effective way of reducing poverty, although it is not sufficient by itself.[7] Inequalities in education and skill acquisition can explain the fact that women benefit less than men from economic opportunities as well as the trend towards the increase of women among the poorest in the population.[25]

32. Gender inequalities in access to education are well documented in rural areas. The situation varies considerably between countries and regions, and although there is no exact data about the situation in rural areas, global figures indicate that approximately 60 per cent of the illiterate people in the world are women, with only 69 per cent of women over the age of 15 being literate, compared to 83 per cent of men.[26]

33. The needs and opportunities for livelihood diversification within the context of globalization place increased time demands on rural women and girls. Increasing reliance on the labour of girls may jeopardize their education or even result in their complete withdrawal from school. Other factors that contribute to reduced enrolment rates and increased dropout rates for girls include school fees and the lack of girl-friendly environments, including lack of female teachers, gender-sensitive teaching methods and materials, transport and sanitation facilities. For example, a survey of education in Yemen in 1997-1998 found that only 20 per cent of teachers in rural areas were women and identified this fact as a major deterrent to girls' enrolment and retention in school in rural areas.[27] Reduction or abolition of school fees and special monetary incentives have resulted in increases in school enrolment of girls. For example, in Bangladesh the launching of a nationwide stipend programme for rural girls in 1994 had a significant impact on their enrolment, which increased from 27 to 54 per cent.[28]

34. In addition to increasing women's access to the formal education system, it is important to provide women with access to training, including on marketing, rural entrepreneurship, farm and household management and financing. Rural women's access to training and education is essential if they are to develop livelihood strategies that build on the opportunities created by globalization.

F. Decision-making

35. Globalization has been accompanied by political changes in the form of democratization and decentralization and this opens up new space for women. Government contributions to the 10-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action confirmed a general trend towards increased participation of women at the local levels of decision-making (see E/CN.6/2005/2 and Corr.1). Various systems of positive action were utilized, including the reservation of a proportion of seats on local councils for women, as in India, and the creation of special electoral wards for women, as in Uganda. The most recent local elections in Jordan, in 2003, for example, resulted in the election of five women and the appointment of 94 women to village councils. In India, more than a million women are now at different levels of local governance in both rural and urban local governmental bodies (see E/CN.6/2005/2 and Corr.1).

36. Rural women continue to face a number of constraints on their ability to participate in formal and informal decision-making processes. The predominant responsibility for household tasks continues to be assigned to women and girls and limits their time and opportunities to be actively involved in educational, social and political activities. Discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes, lack of education, security concerns and freedom of movement may also limit opportunities for women to participate.

37. Where rural women participate in decision-making, there are signs that women in local government have a tangible impact on allocation of resources, for example in relation to services and amenities such as water supplies and public health, as well as positive effects in terms of building social acceptance of women's political authority. Gender-sensitive budget initiatives have been undertaken to promote the needs of rural women, but studies indicate that these initiatives only lead to women's empowerment if they are accompanied by the creation of an enabling environment that eliminates inequalities in other areas such as household division of labour.[29]

G. Household structures and gender relations

38. Rural households respond to the opportunities and challenges created by increased dependence on the market by diversifying their resource base and by restructuring the division of labour within the household. The emerging diversity of household types includes an increasing number of households headed by women, as well as those containing several generations. The precise structure of multi-generational households varies, but is typified by the inclusion of additional kin beyond the nuclear family of parents and children. Some households, including female-headed multi-generational households, may also have a missing middle generation as a result of migration or the impact of HIV/AIDS.

39. As described in the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development (A/59/287/Add.1), increased labour mobility as a result of globalization is one of the most important reasons for changes in household composition. In some female-headed households, men are away on temporary and seasonal migration, while continuing to maintain decision-making powers. There are female-headed households without a link to males because women are unmarried, widowed,

divorced or abandoned. In these households, women have decision-making powers and the full social and economic responsibility for the well-being of household members, though often under conditions of lower economic and social status and access to opportunities. In single households or households otherwise characterized by the absence of a male household member, rural women often assume all tasks and responsibilities, which can be an empowering experience for them.

40. Women employ different strategies to compensate for the loss of labour. They may organize labour exchanges with other women, work longer hours or, if they have income from sources such as remittances, hire additional labour. But they might also adopt such strategies as reducing agricultural areas under cultivation or switching to less labour-intensive but less nutritious crops, thus affecting the food security of the household.

H. Migration

41. Although labour mobility generally results in the redistribution of tasks and responsibilities, the impact of migration on household division of labour and gender relations varies significantly, depending on whether women or men are migrating. As outlined in the 2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development (A/56/268), women are increasingly involved in various types of migration. Lack of access to resources at home, particularly productive land, is one factor that contributes to women's migration from rural areas, complemented by the potential attraction of labour market opportunities. These movements are from rural to rural areas, as young women join the agro-industry workforce; rural to urban areas, when girls and adult women leave for towns and cities to enter the service and manufacturing sectors, including in export processing zones; and international as women leave to work as nannies, maids, factory workers, entertainers, teachers and nurses overseas. Apart from economic reasons for migration, which are of primary importance, women and in particular young single women, also migrate in order to escape the hardship of rural life and patriarchal and social control.

42. Voluntary migration of rural women in search of new job opportunities may contribute to their empowerment as they develop skills and experience and decide to build an independent life. However, there has also been a rise in forced migration, such as trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of exploitation, including prostitution and forced labour. Rural women may be particularly vulnerable to trafficking because they have more limited access to information, education and training, employment opportunities and control over economic resources, including land.

43. Male migration can bring substantial benefits to women in rural areas. In spite of increasing women's time and work burdens, male migration may also lead to women's empowerment as they acquire new skills and capacities by taking on the responsibility for households and seeking employment outside the home.

44. Remittances providing additional family income constitute further benefits of migration. Migration increases remittances to rural areas and strengthens market linkages between rural and urban areas. Some evidence suggests that migrant women remit more of their income to their families than male migrants. The impact of remittance income on household well-being depends on who controls remittance income and how it is spent. Remittances from migrants do not reach everyone in

need and may thus increase inequality. Remittances may also depend on contributions from migrant women who are not investing in their own living conditions, health care, nutrition and education.

I. HIV/AIDS

45. There is ample evidence that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is a critical problem for rural development and for rural women in particular, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.[30] HIV/AIDS has severe impacts on women and girls, as a result of gender-specific division of family care, labour and resource control, as well as gender-related discrimination. A study of rural families in Uganda found that young women in particular are more susceptible to contracting HIV for biological and socio-economic reasons and because they have, until recently, been neglected by HIV/AIDS prevention measures.[31] The illness and death of a woman is likely to threaten rural household food security because women are predominantly responsible for food production and the nutritional status of children. The loss of a woman's income can have a significant impact as women tend to spend more of their income on family needs such as education and health services than men,[30] even though women often earn significantly less.

46. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has had a dramatic impact on household structures and composition in rural areas. The findings of a survey conducted in Uganda on the impact of HIV/AIDS on agricultural production[32] examined 313 households, the majority of which (61.2 per cent) were involved in crop farming, while the others were involved in livestock farming (17 per cent) and fishing (21.8 per cent). Less than half of the sampled households (46 per cent) reported having both a female and a male partner. Almost a third of the households (30.4 per cent) were headed by female adults, in most cases widows. Over a tenth of the households (14.4 per cent) were headed by a grandfather and 4.5 per cent were headed by both grandparents, caring for grandchildren whose parents, in the majority of cases, had died from illnesses related to HIV/AIDS. Households headed by children had also emerged (4.2 per cent) as a result of HIV/AIDS.[32]

47. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has had other wide-ranging effects on households in rural areas. Families often lose members during their most productive time of life. HIV/AIDS intensifies the workload and responsibilities of women and girls in rural areas since they have to care for the sick and provide for dependent orphans. The responsibilities and costs associated with caring and eventual death are aggravated by the poor development of rural social infrastructure as well as privatization of health care, which may become less accessible to women and girls.[6] Social and cultural norms that condone violence against women or fail to enable women to negotiate safe sex, as well as harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting and wife inheritance, can also exacerbate the spread of HIV/AIDS in rural areas.[33]

J. Information and communication technologies

48. General Assembly resolution 58/146 stressed the need to ensure that rural women have access to and full participation in the area of information and communication technologies, and invited the World Summit on the Information

Society, in Geneva and Tunis, to take into consideration, while addressing gender issues, the priorities and needs of rural women and girls as active users of information and to ensure their participation in developing and implementing global information and communication technology strategies. Agreed conclusions[34] adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women at its forty-seventh session, in 2003, addressed, inter alia, women's equal access, for example through tele-centres and business incubators.

49. Effective access and use of information and communication technologies can improve rural women's leadership and participation in community and economic development activities. However, rural women are at the lowest level of the digital gender divide. According to findings of the International Telecommunication Union, limited infrastructure, affordability and education are the main barriers for rural women in Africa. Time, geographical location of facilities and social and cultural norms constitute additional constraints.[35] The improvement of access for rural women and their participation in information and communication technologies will continue to be limited if access to infrastructure, such as roads and transport, education, training and economic resources, including financing, is not increased. Multiple forms of media and communication technologies reach more women in rural areas.

50. The Declaration of Principles of the World Summit on the Information Society affirmed that Governments are committed to ensuring that the information society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. In preparation for the second phase of the World Summit, to be held in Tunis in November 2005, gender equality advocates have focused, inter alia, on financing information and communication technologies for development, including through the integration of relevant policies into poverty reduction strategies; funding community networks because of their effectiveness in expanding access to information and communication technologies to rural low-income women and identifying ways of lowering service delivery costs to underserved and underdeveloped areas. The importance of supporting rural women as information producers has also been emphasized.

III. Activities of the United Nations system

51. Since the submission of the last report of the Secretary-General, United Nations entities have continued to respond to the challenges facing rural women by implementing policies and programmes addressing different aspects of the situation of rural women, including land ownership, microfinance, access to markets and trade, migration, trafficking and knowledge-sharing, education and training.

52. IFAD implemented a project in the Gambia from 1997 to 2004, which focused on improving rice production for impoverished households, mainly those of poor landless women. The project involved a process of land reform and redistribution in exchange for labour and was successful because of the mobilization and empowerment of women in intra-community bargaining.[36] A project carried out by IFAD in Nepal from 1993-2003 assisted poor farmers, mainly women from ethnic minorities, in the regeneration of degraded land.[37] The role of women in intra-household decision-making was enhanced through their contribution to family

income and the project saw an increased acceptance by men of women's involvement in forestry management and public participation. Another IFAD project, on enhancing rural livelihood through the revival of traditional handicrafts, in Central and Eastern Europe empowers the rural poor, particularly women, through greater opportunities in production of handicrafts.

53. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has built the capacity of Member States to integrate gender perspectives in policies and programmes and has provided support to over 30 countries in developing sex-disaggregated agricultural statistics. Capacity-building has been pursued in all regions. In Slovenia, FAO supported the planning and formulation of a national action plan for integrating gender issues into the national rural and agricultural development programme. In Cambodia, FAO has addressed the economic status of rural women to ensure food security. FAO also plays an important role in supporting women in the process of agriculture recovery and rehabilitation after conflicts and natural disasters and recently carried out projects in this regard in Afghanistan and Iraq.

54. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has promoted the economic empowerment of rural women through multi-stakeholder dialogues and capacity-building. ESCAP has facilitated sharing of experience and good practices on the elimination of gender discrimination in the labour market through gender-sensitive legislation. In March 2005, ESCAP co-organized a seminar on electronic-business opportunities for women.

55. In Burundi, China, Kazakhstan, Romania, South Africa, Tajikistan, Uruguay, and Viet Nam, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has facilitated rural women's access to credit and expanded market outreach for exporting their products through access to fair trade zones. UNDP, working with the Japan Women in Development Fund, has supported programmes in Bhutan, Cameroon, Egypt, India, Rwanda and Ukraine to increase rural women's access to information and communication technologies. For example, in Egypt, model health clinics have been set up in rural areas and provide, inter alia, access to and training on health-related information with extensive use of information and communication technologies. In Ukraine, under a project entitled "Sustaining women farmers", about 2,000 prospective women entrepreneurs have attended training seminars in information and communication technologies. Promoting participation of rural women in planning and resource allocation has also been a key element of UNDP interventions. For example, in India, poverty alleviation initiatives have committed $6 million to supporting partnerships with civil society organizations, including women's groups. UNDP also continues advocacy work for the elimination of violence against women in rural areas. In Cambodia, El Salvador, Nepal and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), alternative mechanisms for informal community justice and mediation at the village level have been established and a decrease in domestic violence has been reported.

56. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) projects have supported the integration of women in advocacy for and building of networks on environmental issues. UNEP has also undertaken initiatives to strengthen the capacity of women in rural areas in knowledge-sharing and natural resources management, for example in water and sanitation management.

57. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) capacity-building programme for the empowerment of marginalized adolescent girls in depressed rural areas in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan covers literacy and life skills, management of microenterprises, microfinance and science education with access to information and communication technologies. UNESCO coordinates a project on strengthening the economic capacity of women for primary education in rural areas in Burkina Faso, covering preschool activities, literacy courses for women and income-generating activities. A skills-based literacy programme for women in China has resulted in a decrease of the female illiteracy rate by 29 per cent, compared with the average for the province. A UNESCO project in Nabanna, India, on "Networking rural women and knowledge" explores innovative uses of databases, Intranet portals and web-based partnerships in the local language for the benefit of poor women. The emphasis is on building a framework for information-sharing, content creation, off-line information dissemination and web-based partnerships with organizations located outside the region. The findings of this and other new models and innovative approaches of applying information and communication technologies for poverty reduction at the grass-roots level are documented in two UNESCO publications: *Profiles and Experiences in ICT Innovation for Poverty Reduction* and *Research on ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction*.

58. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has supported land reform programmes in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, including through the provision of technical advice on land legislation and training for legal clinics. In the Arab States, UNIFEM has supported the participation of women in information and communication technologies through a new partnership in a Jordanian government-sponsored "e-village" initiative. Apart from education and training opportunities, the project also creates new job and marketing opportunities, focusing especially on linking women producers to expanded tourist markets. In a rural community heavily affected by HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe, a UNIFEM-supported pilot programme has noted that men's participation in home-based care is increasing and that stigma and discrimination against women have declined. In 2004, UNIFEM, in collaboration with non-governmental partners, piloted an initiative in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India to improve the livelihoods of rural women in the non-timber forest products sector.

59. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) focuses on initiatives to move women from subsistence agriculture to the manufacturing sector through off-farm productive activities. UNIDO has developed programmes to support women in post-harvest management in Afghanistan, Burundi, Eritrea, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Pakistan, Rwanda, the Sudan and Yemen. To support the socio-economic empowerment of rural women and their full participation, UNIDO also assists women to organize business associations to facilitate access to finance.

60. Interventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to promote the improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas focus on promoting the rights of women working in rural areas in the agricultural sector, creating job training and skills training opportunities for rural women, generating opportunities for women's entrepreneurship and employment, strengthening institutional capacity to provide financial services to women, eliminating child labour and combating trafficking in women and children. Such programmes have been successfully

conducted, for example, in Pakistan and Viet Nam. To improve the capacity of ILO constituents (Governments and employers' and workers' organizations), ILO provides technical advice on the inclusion of gender-related questions in the context of data-collection surveys.

61. The World Intellectual Property Organization has an ongoing programme addressing traditional knowledge and genetic resources. The programme includes a focus on the knowledge and intellectual property of indigenous women, many of whom live in rural communities.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

62. **The process of globalization has direct and indirect effects on the empowerment of rural women. Benefits have included increased opportunities for off-farm activities, including wage employment in non-agricultural sectors, and enhanced opportunities for participation in local decision-making and networking, including through information and communication technologies. On the other hand, dependence on market forces can weaken labour standards and social protection and the privatization of productive assets, such as land and public goods, can exacerbate the socio-economic marginalization of rural women. Rural women also experience the effects of unequal household divisions of labour, lack of access to education and health services and discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes and practices and violence.**

63. **The empowerment of rural women has a direct impact on the implementation of the Millennium Declaration in all areas, including development, security and human rights, and particularly in relation to poverty eradication. The situation of rural women should be given explicit attention in the context of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the sixtieth session of the General Assembly and in the integrated and coordinated follow-up to major conferences and summits.**

64. **The forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Tunis, should address the priorities and needs of rural women, including resources to access and utilize information and communication technologies effectively, and ensure their participation in developing and implementing information and communication activities at the national and local levels.**

65. **Governments, United Nations entities and all other relevant stakeholders should support legislation, policies and programmes that strengthen the positive effects of globalization on the empowerment of rural women. Such legislation, policies and programmes must build on the framework provided by the Beijing Platform for Action and its follow-up, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, in particular its article 14. Specific interventions might include:**

(a) **Ensuring attention to rural women's needs and contributions, including through enhanced consultation, and their full participation in the development, implementation and monitoring of macroeconomic policies and programmes and poverty reduction strategies, including poverty reduction strategy papers based on the Millennium Development Goals;**

(b) **Promoting and protecting women's equal rights to property and inheritance through legislation, promotion of legal literacy and legal assistance to rural women, awareness-raising campaigns and training of government officials;**

(c) **Ensuring the full integration of rural women's perspectives in all strategies for combating HIV/AIDS and giving priority to multi-dimensional strategies directly addressing the impact of HIV/AIDS on rural women;**

(d) **Promoting rural women's participation in decision-making, including through affirmative action, and support for women's organizations, labour unions or other associations and civil society groups promoting rural women's rights;**

(e) **Promoting gender-sensitive budget initiatives at the national and local levels that support the allocation of resources for the benefit of women in rural areas;**

(f) **Improving availability, access to and use of critical rural infrastructure, such as energy and transport, and public goods such as water and communal resources, as well as access to reproductive health services;**

(g) **Supporting formal and non-formal education and training to build the capabilities of girls and women in rural areas and eliminate gender-stereotyping;**

(h) **Mobilizing resources, including at the national level and through official development assistance, for increasing women's access to existing savings and credit schemes, as well as targeted programmes that provide women with capital, knowledge and tools that enhance their economic capacities;**

(i) **Supporting remunerative non-agricultural employment of rural women, improving working conditions and increasing access to productive resources;**

(j) **Increasing capacity for gender analysis, including through training programmes and development and dissemination of methodologies and tools, to ensure the full integration of rural women's perspectives in policies and programmes for rural development, as well as in conflict prevention and humanitarian, peacebuilding and post-conflict rehabilitation and recovery activities;**

(k) **Addressing the lack of timely, reliable and sex-disaggregated data, including through intensifying efforts to include women's unpaid work in official statistics, and developing a systematic and comparative research base on rural women that will inform policy and programme decisions.**

Notes

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[2] Ibid., annex II.

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